

The Oppenheimer Imperative: Normalising Atomic Terror

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The atomic bomb created the conditions of contingent catastrophe, forever placing the world on the precipice of existential doom. But in doing so, it created a philosophy of acceptable cruelty, worthy extinction, legitimate extermination. The scenarios for such programs of existential realisation proved endless. Entire departments, schools of thought, and think tanks were dedicated to the absurdly criminal notion that atomic warfare could be tenable for the mere reason that someone (or some people) might survive. Despite the relentless march of civil society against nuclear weapons, such insidious thinking persists with a certain obstinate lunacy.

It only takes a brief sojourn into the previous literature of the nuke nutters to realise how appealing such thinking has proven to be. But it had its challenges. John Hersey proved threatening with his 1946 *New Yorker* spectacular "[Hiroshima](#)", vivifying the horrors arising from the atomic bombing of the Japanese city through the eyes of a number of survivors. In February 1947, former Secretary of War Henry Stimson [shot a countering proposition](#) in *Harper's*, thereby attempting to normalise a spectacularly vicious weapon in terms of necessity and function; the use of the bombs against Japan saved lives, as any invasion would have cost "over a million casualties, to American forces alone." The Allies, he surmised, "would be faced with the enormous task of destroying an armed force of five million men and five thousand suicide aircraft, belonging to a race which had already amply demonstrated its ability to fight literally to the death."

Inadvertent as it was, the Stimson rationale for justifying theatrical never-to-be-repeated mass murder to prevent mass murder fell into the bloodstream of popular strategic thinking. Albert Wohlstetter's [The Delicate Balance of Terror](#) chews over the grim details of acceptable extermination, wondering about the meaning of extinction and whether the word means what it's meant to, notably in the context of nuclear war. "Would not a general thermonuclear war mean 'extinction; for the aggressor as well as the defender? 'Extinction'

is a state that badly needs analysis.” Wohlstetter goes on to make a false comparison, citing 20 million Soviet deaths in non-atomic conflict during the Second World War as an example of astonishing resilience: the country, in short, recovered “extremely well from the catastrophe.”

Resilience becomes part of the semantics of contemplated, and acceptable mass homicide. Emphasis is placed on the bounce-back factor, the ability to recover, even in the face of such weapons. These were themes that continued to feature. The [1958 report](#) of the National Security Council’s Net Evaluation Subcommittee pondered what might arise from a Soviet attack in 1961 involving 553 nuclear weapons with a total yield exceeding 2,000 megatons. The conclusion: 50 million Americans would perish in the conflagration, with nine million left sick or injured. The Sino-Soviet bloc would duly receive retaliatory attacks that would kill 71 million people. A month later, a further 196 million would die. In such macabre calculations, the authors of the report could still breezily conclude that “[t]he balance of strength would be on the side of the United States.”

Modern nuclear strategy, in terms of such normalised, clinical lunacy, continues to find form in the tolerance of tactical weapons and modernised arsenals. To be tactical is to be somehow bijou, cute, and contained, accepting mass murder under the guise of moderation and variation. One can be bad, but bad within limits. Such lethal wonders are [described](#), according to a number of views assembled in *The New York Times*, as “much less destructive” in nature, with “variable explosive yields that could be dialed up or down depending on the military situation.”

The journal *Nature* [prefers](#) a grimmer assessment, suggesting the ultimate calamity of firestorms, excessive soot in the atmosphere, disruption of food production systems, the contamination of soil and water supplies, nuclear winter, and broader climatic catastrophe.

Some of these views are teasingly touched on in Christopher Nolan’s *Oppenheimer*, a three-hour cross narrative jumble boisterously expansive and noisy (the music refuses to leave you alone, bruising the senses). While the idea of harnessing an exceptional, exterminating power haunts the scientific community, the Manhattan Project is ultimately functional: developing the atom for military purposes before Hitler does. Once developed, the German side of the equation becomes irrelevant. The urgent quest for creating the atomic weapon becomes the basis for using it. Once left to politics and military strategy, such weapons are normalised, even relativised as simply other instruments in inflicting destruction. *Oppenheimer* leaves much room to that lunatic creed, though somehow grants the chief scientist moral absolution.

This is a tough proposition, given Oppenheimer’s membership of the Scientific Panel of the Interim Committee that would, eventually, convince President Harry Truman to use the bombs. In their June 16, 1945 [recommendations](#), Oppenheimer, along with Enrico Fermi, Arthur H. Compton and Ernest O. Lawrence, acknowledged dissenting scientific opinions preferring “a purely technical demonstration to that of a purely military application best designed to induce surrender.” The scientific panel proved unequivocal: it could “propose no technical demonstration likely to bring an end to the war; we see no acceptable alternative to direct military use.”

In the film, those showing preference for a purely technical demonstration are given the briefest of airings. Leó Szilárd’s [petition](#) arguing against a military use “at least not until the

terms which will be imposed after the war on Japan were made public in detail and Japan were given an opportunity to surrender” makes a short and sharp appearance, only to vanish. As Seiji Yamada [writes](#), that petition led a short, charmed life, first circulated in the Metallurgical Laboratory in Chicago, only to make its way to Edward Teller at Los Alamos, who then turned it over to Oppenheimer. The petition was, in turn, surrendered to the Manhattan Project’s chief overseer, General Leslie Groves, who “stamped it ‘classified’ and put it in a safe. It therefore never reached Truman.”

Nolan depicts the relativisation argument in some detail – one that justifies mass death in the name of technical prowess – during an interrogation by US circuit judge Roger Robb, appointed as special counsel during the 1954 security hearing against Oppenheimer. In the relevant scene, Robb wishes to trap the hapless scientist for his opposition to creating a weapon of even greater murderous power than the fission devices used against Japan. Why oppose the thermonuclear option, prods the special counsel, given your support for the atomic one? And why did he not oppose the remorseless firebombing raids of Tokyo, conducted by conventional weapons?

Nolan also has the vengeful Lewis Strauss, the two-term chairman of the US Atomic Energy Commission, moan that Oppenheimer is the less than saintly figure who managed to get away, ethically, with his atomic exploits while moralising about the relentless march about ever more destructive creations. In that sentiment, the Machiavellian ambition monger has a point: the genie, once out, was never going to be put back in.

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